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ABSTRACT

The document discusses limitations of the current practice of educational ethnography and suggests that ethnographers could best help teachers through more participation and less observation. Ethnography is the process of describing reality from the point of view of the participant through direct observation of social behavior. Some weaknesses relevant to the utility of this approach include the time required for fieldwork and report writing and the questions of superficiality, validity, and adequacy of evidence. Major limitations include the tendency to emphasize the descriptive scope at the expense of the specific, the bias toward the typical, and the tendency to characterize the individual as a passive object who receives influences from a diverse field of external forces. In other words, the written description often depicts a static event by omitting an account of action and the process of reflective thought. Thus, in order for ethnographers to assist school practitioners, it is necessary for them to join with teachers and administrators in their daily work and in the transformation of that work. Ethnographers must get involved in schools as workers and citizens. In this way educational ethnography will allow itself to be transformed to an analytic tool by its use within the life of everyday practice in schools. (Author/KC)

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Mere Ethnography: Some Problems in its Use[1] in Educational Practice

Frederick Erickson[2]

I am impressed here by the circumstances of time and place. It is just 10 years since the founding of the Council on Anthropology and Education. The founders were ahead of their time, and "ethnography" was a little used term in educational research. It is now widely used, although there seems to be little agreement as to its meaning.

I am impressed also by the place of these meetings: Los Angeles. This is Garfinkel-land--Harold Garfinkel, the sociologist, one of the originators of an approach to study labeled "ethnomethodology" (Garfinkel, 1967; Turner, 1974). That is a set of ways of studying the *methods of the folk*, those ordinary ways of making sense that people use to get through everyday life. In a lecture three years ago, I heard Garfinkel draw a cryptic distinction between ethnomethodology and ethnography. He dismissed the latter out of hand, calling it "mere ethnography." My first reaction to that was defensive. I fell back on a way of speaking used in a speech community in which I had done fieldwork, and said to myself, "Who you calling *mere*, Jack? Yo' *mama* mere."

Here, I will make only one retort to Garfinkel. What I like about

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[1]Text of the Past Presidential Address delivered at the annual meeting of the Council on Anthropology and Education, Los Angeles, Calif., November 17, 1978. This paper will appear in a forthcoming issue of *Anthropology and Education Quarterly*.

[2]Frederick Erickson is a senior researcher in the Institute for Research on Teaching.

ethnomethodology is its commitment to staying close to people's active processes of sense making. What I do not like is ethnomethodology's own problem of *mereness*, its tendency to lapse into mere subjective idealism.

Since hearing Garfinkel's talk I have decided that he may have had a valid point about ethnography. He got me thinking about some intrinsic *merenesses*, limitations of ethnography which may have severe consequences for its short-term and long-term usefulness in an arena of practical action such as education.

By "ethnography" I mean classic, general ethnography, following Bauman's (1972) brief definition of it as "the process of constructing through direct personal observation of social behavior, a theory of the working of a particular culture in terms as close as possible to the way members of that culture view the universe and organize their behavior within it" (p. 157). I also like Peggy Sanday's (in press) even briefer definition: "a way of systematically learning reality from the point of view of the participant" (p. 3). In addition, I mean ethnography in a more concrete sense: a monograph-length written description.

There are some obvious weaknesses in general ethnography so defined, weaknesses with consequences for use. There is the problem of *timing and sequencing* (Mulhauser, 1975); the process of conducting and writing up fieldwork takes so long that the knowledge gained is almost always delivered too late for short-term use in the setting in which the knowledge was gathered. There is potentially a problem of *validity*; fieldwork may not have been intensive enough, the fieldworker may have been inept, the informants may not have been able to articulate implicit aspects of their points of view, they may have concealed information or lied about it, and so the information in the written report may be just plain wrong. Even if the description is factually correct there can be

a problem of *superficiality*; description which stops at the surface appearances of matters which insiders understand implicitly in much more differentiated and multilayered ways than outsiders do (Geertz, 1973). There can be a problem of *evidentiary adequacy*. This is often the case at the most wholistic levels of description, involving statements at a high level of inference about overall trends and patterns and about causal relationships. Such key assertions are often the most theoretically interesting of all, but they may be inadequately supported by data.

With the exception of the first problem -- that of the long time span between data collection and the reporting of results -- all the other problems can be minimized, if not wholly eliminated, by good luck and by getting one's act together in the field and afterward.[3] Even the time span problem can be minimized by more short-term ethnographic work (J. Schensul, 1978), what Hymes has called "ethnographic monitoring" in a very interesting as yet unpublished paper (Hymes, 1976; Hymes, cited in Erickson, 1977). Consequently, I do not see the problems mentioned so far as intrinsic sources of *mereness* in ethnography.

There are at least three related things that I think do contribute to an inherent *mereness* of standard general ethnography. The first is what I see as an inevitable tension between specificity and scope in description -- between precise and adequate amounts of descriptive data relevant to research questions of small compass, and the general comprehensiveness of a more synoptic view. Second and third sources of mereness in ethnography stem at least in part from the tendency to emphasize descriptive scope at the expense of specificity. (They may also derive in part

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[1]For a discussion of key issues in the relatively systematic planning and conduct of fieldwork, see the initial chapters of Pelto and Pelto (1977). The Peltos emphasize the need for the fieldworker's reflection on data quality and quantity while in the field; reflection which can inform deliberate decisions in the process of primary data collection.

from the underlying social theory according to which the research is conducted.) The second source of mereness is the *bias toward the typical* which I think is inherent in holistic description. The third source involves the *tendency to characterize the individual actor as an empty and passive object* which receives influences from a diverse field of external forces, but which is not an active agent within that field. Let us consider the second and third sources of mereness more fully.

The Bias Toward the Typical

I am struck, as I read standard brand ethnographic description, not by its concreteness, richness, and thickness, but by its abstraction, parsimony, and (often) unidimensional thinness. Ethnographic description does seem "thick" in contrast to the extremely thin descriptive languages employed by positivist social scientists, especially those positivists in psychology and sociology who have dominated educational research in the United States. But rich and thick are relative terms. Even the language of on-the-spot field notes represents a tremendous analytic simplification of the social field of actors and action described -- a typification of action (and if we are to take seriously the work of perceptual psychologists as well as that of phoneticians in linguistics, it appears that human perception itself is highly analytic and "abstracting"-- Gibson, 1966; Arnheim, 1969). How much more abstract is the narrative account of an event as it appears in the final ethnographic monograph, selected and framed as a "typical" instance of that event, with theoretically salient features emphasized and theoretically irrelevant detail pruned away.

In the retrospectively written description of what happened, an

idealized time and space are, it seems to me, inevitably created; a domain in which the particular actions, motives, and choices that actual people actively accomplish together appear as fixed and frozen, as was the arrested motion Keats saw on the Grecian urn: "Thou foster child of silence and slow time, Sylvan historian. . . What men or gods are these? What maidens loth? What mad pursuit? What struggle to escape?. . . Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard are sweeter." For me it is the heard melodies, those sung in real time by real people, that are the sweetest (and the same goes for actual mad pursuit), the lived experience which neither art nor science can adequately reproduce nor interpret. It is a Platonized universe, outside our own, that one sees even in the best ethnographic description. Even those Trobriand Islanders of Malinowski, cutting down the tree, blessing it, making it into a canoe, do not live in our everyday world of struggle and of choice in real time, from moment to moment. Dell Hymes (1971), in the introductory essay in Reinventing Anthropology puts it this way: "Too often today we implicitly think of culture as what is completed, as works, not the working, to recall W. von Humboldt's discussion of language as ergon (product), not energia (activity)" (p. 33).

In a recent article in Daedalus on the near future of anthropology, Victor Turner (1977) says a bit grumpily that it is the *processual* which is currently most fashionable among younger anthropologists. I must admit to being fashionable in thinking that classic ethnography is not processual, especially that conducted according to those *order theories*, such as those of structural-functionalism, which emphasize *stasis* over *process* at the societal level. But I am not at all sure that ethnography done from the perspective of more dynamic conflict theories -- neo-Marxian theories -- would be any less static. It may be that the bias toward the

typical is inherent in any attempt at holistic description, done from whatever theoretical frame of reference, because of the tension between scope and specificity I mentioned earlier. It seems to me that the synoptic view inevitably freezes action, substituting an account of works for an account of working.

I may be wrong in being pessimistic about the promise of Marxian approaches for getting us out of the impasse I am describing. I am more confident that I am right in thinking that structural functionalism cannot get us out, with its underlying colonialist assumptions of homeostasis by which whatever is, is taken as being right. When ethnographers do broad scale description, skimming over the inevitably thin ice of inadequate evidence for highly inferential assertions, and do so from the standpoint of a social theory which is essentially static (such as structural-functionalism), then they are sure to present accounts of events without enough richness of descriptive detail so that the decision points involved for actors can be seen. For they are not interested in decision, in struggle; they are interested in showing balance and order.

The Model of the Individual as Passive Culture Bearer

A third source of mereness in ethnography seems to be a concomitant of the bias toward the typical. It is the tendency to portray the individual as the passive recipient of multiple external influences, those of socialization and of social structure. Individuals portrayed in this manner cannot be seen as actively choosing anything. There is no opportunity for such individuals to learn by a process of working reflectively in and through everyday action, reconstructing their

understanding of the action as they are engaged in it, acting on the immediate ecology of action and so transforming the action and its surround, albeit in small ways. Garfinkel calls the passive individuals we have created in ethnography "cultural dopes." I think he is justified in holding accountable ethnography that is mere on such a ground.

Yet here is a paradox: the task of providing and interpreting a more or less broadly synoptic view of the everyday aspects of school teachers', students', and administrators' *working* in and through the particular sociocultural ecology of the moment -- in a given classroom, within a given school and community, within a given society; it is this task that so-called "ethnography" has been called upon to perform by the "mainstream" positivist educational research community in the United States. School practitioners say that the mainstream approaches have failed to do justice to their views of themselves as people who are not cultural dopes, but as people who are making sense and taking action in the midst of struggle. Standard educational research fails in doing justice to their point of view as participants. Can standard brand *mere* ethnography do it either? Could a more radical, Marxian ethnography do justice to that "member's point of view" and not simply dismiss it as "false consciousness"?

The process of learning in and through critical examination of practice by school practitioners themselves could be a process by which American schooling might be transformed in small ways that make a big

difference.[4] Mere ethnography could be of use in all this, but not as a portrayal of what is real; not as a proxy for experience itself; possibly as an image of the real which stimulates reflection and emotion. Those thoughts together with feelings are the basis on which one develops a commitment to change. Presently ethnographers do not know how they can assist school practitioners in making use of ethnographic images; certainly we can not just hand them monographs to read. Perhaps in the next 10 to 25 years we may learn more about all this.

Keats was moved to thought and feeling when he saw the urn in the British Museum. He wrote a poem, and that is a form of action not to be denigrated. Neither is writing a general ethnography to be denigrated. To the extent that I am an ethnographer, I am one partly because on reading what people like Malinowski have written, I have had reactions similar to those of Keats as he contemplated the Grecian urn. I love those texts. They are a form of action. Their record of a wide range of diversity in ways of being human is the foundation of all our inquiry as anthropologists. I cannot simply turn my back on them. But writing is not the only action we can take. In addition, the ethnography of Malinowski and most other

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[4] Marx, in the Theses on Feuerbach (see Marx, 1845, in Feuer [Ed.], 1959 and the more elaborated discussion in Engels, 1888, in Feuer [Ed.], 1959) used the term praxis to refer to the dialectical process of personal and societal transformation in which, mutually, practical action is influenced by reflective insight and insight is influenced by action. A considerable literature of commentary has followed. On the application of praxis in the conduct of teaching, see the recent review article by Small (1978) and the programmatic statement of Freire (1972). (The latter, I am compelled to say, always strikes me as too optimistic in its assumptions about human capacity for change.) See Bourdieu (1977) for a much more profound consideration of the notion of praxis, in which its implications for social theory are considered together with issues of substance and method in anthropology, all in the light of what the author claims is a fundamental qualitative difference between, on the one hand, the workings of "practical logic" in the concrete circumstances of social life, and on the other hand, the models constructed by analysts in an attempt to account for the logic of practice. For a brief discussion of the implicit theories of individual learning, growth, and personality which underly Marx's own brief statements on praxis, see Fromm (1969).

classic ethnography -- mere ethnography -- does not address such questions as "How can we make this canoe better?" Thus classic ethnographers have been unable to learn what can only be learned when they get involved in the action and pick up their own end of the log (on involvement in the action, see S. Schensul, 1974).

This may indeed be a fourth source of mereness in standard brand ethnography -- the usual researcher's role as a minimally participating observer. Ethnographers may be immersed in the field experience, yet avoid involvement in the action there. If that is the case, then we can only claim to have been "partially participant observers." By calling ourselves participant observers without qualifying the term we may be exaggerating the actual amount and range of our participation in the settings we study. Unless we are vulnerable to and accountable for how the action happens in the same ways (or at least in somewhat similar ways) as are other participants in the setting we are studying, we can only claim a very partial kind of participation. On the basis of so limited a set of ways of being present in a setting, our descriptive accounts of practical action might well suffer from inherent mereness.

If we as ethnographers really want our work as scholars to be of use in educational practice, more of us must somehow join with teachers and administrators in their daily work and in the transformation of that work. Some ethnographers have already done that, and not only those of us who are the youngest. If our aim is to study working rather than works, then we must *join in the work*. That doesn't mean we should "go native," or that everyone should go teach second grade next year; but somehow we must get involved in schools as worker and citizen, and not just as the guest speaker in a one-shot inservice workshop. Only by joining in some *continuing* work can anthropologists of education discover, together

with those they describe, new ways of gaining and using insights from descriptive accounts -- suspended motion, unheard melody -- in the reconstruction of actual life in real time in educational settings. If we want "school people" to be more observant as participants I think we must become more participating as observers.

In the first quarter of the twentieth century, social and cultural anthropology succeeded in moving out of the armchair and into the field. Can ethnographers in the last quarter of this century move from doing *fieldwork in the study of education* to doing *work in the field of education?* I hope that American educational ethnography will allow itself to be transformed as an analytic tool by its use within the life of everyday practice in schools. I hope that more American ethnographers will allow themselves to be transformed by involvement in the action, by joining in the responsibility for change, and by taking concrete action toward changing the particular circumstances of everyday life in actual schools and school communities.

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